

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C-19

NEW YORK TIMES
19 August 1983

Publishing: Trade With the Russians

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ONLY a handful of American publishers will be at the Moscow International Book Fair from Sept. 6 to 12. Many have chosen to boycott the fair as a way of expressing opposition to Soviet persecution of writers and artists, but there is actually little reason for trade-book publishers — that is, publishers of books sold to the public through bookstores — to attend.

"The Russians are not much interested in buying trade titles," Bill Orr, manager of McGraw-Hill's foreign rights department, said the other day. "They print some of the old classics, but those you don't have to pay royalties on."

What the Russians are interested in buying is rights to scientific and technological books, books on engineering, computers, agriculture and medicine. And since they joined the Universal Copyright Convention in 1973, the Russians have generally made good on their promised payments to American authors and publishers.

"Prior to joining the convention, American authors could go to Russia and buy vodka and maybe a sable," Mr. Orr said. "Now they are paid in American dollars."

Completely Different System

Some American publishers think the Russians agree to pay too little, but others chalk it up to the cost of doing business with the Soviet Union. "It's a completely different system from the rest of the world, but either you accept that as being their system or you don't do business with them," said Lauren Fransen, manager of for-

eign rights for John Wiley & Sons.

Other publishers pay royalties based on the number of books they sell. The Russians, by contrast, base their payments on the size of their press run and the length of the manuscript. "They pay so many rubles per signature, a signature being 16 pages," said Leo Albert, chairman of Prentice-Hall's international division. He added that Prentice-Hall suspects that the Russians "may have had additional press runs on one or two of our titles without telling us."

The Russians usually pay 25 percent of the amount on signing up a book and the rest on publication. But Mir, one of a number of Soviet book publishers, and one of the few that publishes in a variety of academic areas, pays 10 percent in advance and the rest on publication. In any event, all dealings are through the Soviet copyright agency, VAAP, which deducts a 10 percent agent's commission on transactions.

In traffic going the other way, American publishers have issued limited quantities of Soviet technical and scientific titles. Wiley has published 14 Soviet books since about 1976 and has some 50 others under option, primarily books on geology, physics and nuclear sciences. "We have to be able to sell a couple of thousand copies to justify the translation," Mrs. Fransen said. The books sell mostly to research scientists and libraries.

Co-Publishing Operations

Prentice-Hall has co-published two scientific books with Mir and is interested in doing up to 10 others. Mir sends the completed manuscript in English to Prentice-Hall for review, Prentice-Hall edits the manuscript and returns it to Mir, and the Soviet company sets the type and publishes the book. Then it ships finished copies, bearing a joint Mir-Prentice-Hall imprint, back to the United States. Mr. Albert said that the books are 20 percent to 25 percent cheaper than they would be if printed here.

A number of countries still do not belong to the copyright convention, but the major holdout is China, which buys editions of American books in English and publishes them without paying royalties. "They're in the process of developing a copyright law, at which time they'll decide whether to join the copyright convention," said Waldo Moore, associate register of copyright for the United States Copyright Office.

American publishers have long wondered why the Russians finally joined the copyright convention, after refusing to do so for years. According to Martin P. Levin, president of the Times Mirror Book Publishing Group, who consulted State Department files and documents released through the Freedom of Information Act, they did so in order to obtain an important quid pro quo from the United States Government — special tax concessions, which enabled the Russians to avoid withholding provisions of American tax law on payments due to the Soviet Government in the United States.

Mr. Levin also said that Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn may have been trying to escape the authority of VAAP when in December 1973, before the Soviet copyright agency assumed exclusive jurisdiction of all works of Soviet authors, he allowed the Y.M.C.A. Press in Paris to publish in Russian "The Gulag Archipelago," which describes the Soviet prison system.

The Russians expelled Mr. Solzhenitsyn on Feb. 13, 1974, but before coming to the United States he created in Switzerland the Russian Social Fund. That fund, to which he assigned all the proceeds of "The Gulag Archipelago," more than \$1 million so far, provides prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union with food, clothing and money. However, in May, the Soviet Union sentenced Valery Repin, a former fund worker, to two years in a labor camp and three years of internal exile after he "confessed" on Leningrad television that the fund was run by the Central Intelligence Agency. His successor as fund custodian, Sergei Khodorovich, a well-known translator, who suggested that Mr. Repin had been broken under interrogation, also went to prison.

But the technical and scientific publishers consider their relationship with the Soviet Union beneficial. "It's led to better relations among us," Mr. Orr said, "a substantial number of titles are being published, and the Soviets, by joining the copyright convention, have acknowledged that foreign books are the products of their individual authors."